

Jazz Improvisation: 15 Tips for Getting Started

- 1. Variation is the foundation of improvisation.** Perhaps the best place to start improvising is with variations or embellishments of the melody. This could be as simple as adding one or two notes to the melody of a tune that you know. Simple embellishments (such as trills or turns) can be applied to selected notes of the melody or you could try rewriting small sections of the melody. Try to rewrite or ad. lib. the ending of pieces you're playing.
- 2. Learn the blues scale.** The blues scale is a good choice for improvising over many tunes, particularly simple tunes that stay in the same key. For example, if a tune is in F major, you could try working with the F blues scale (the *parallel* blues scale) or the D blues scale (the *relative* blues scale). A 12 bar blues is an obvious place to begin improvising with the blues scale. Use a consistent, appropriate fingering.
- 3. Learn intervals.** An interval is the fundamental relationship between two notes; practice recognizing and singing them. This is a good first step toward becoming aware of the relationships that make up scales, chords, and melodic phrases.
- 4. Learn the sixty basic seventh chords and their accompanying scales.** This is the basic vocabulary that you will need to learn jazz tunes and improvise to the chords within them. The chords include the 1) the major-seventh (and the accompanying major and Lydian scales); 2) the dominant-seventh (and the accompanying dominant scale also called the Mixolydian mode); 3) the minor-seventh (and the accompanying Dorian mode and natural minor scale); 4) the half-diminished (and the accompanying Locrian and Locrian #2 modes); and 5) the diminished-seventh chord (and the accompanying diminished scale).
- 5. Experiments with repeated groups of notes.** Repeated groups of three or four notes are easy to play and are thus played with greater ease and rhythmic conviction. You can apply this technique by playing the same group of pitches while varying the rhythm, or playing the same rhythm while changing the pitches.
- 6. Develop your sense of swing.** If the concept or feel of swing is difficult for you, simply break each beat up into a triplet. Then connect the first two eighth notes together while leaving the third eighth note as it is. You could think of a measure of 4/4 as a measure of 12/8 if that is any easier.
- 7. Practice playing four measures at a time, at a slow tempo, without improvising on the first 2 beats of each measure.** As you play through a tune, play the chord on the first beat of each measure and listen to it. Then you can play something on beats three and four. This will give you time to hear the chord and think of something to play. Moreover, the technique trains you in leaving space between your phrases; this sounds more natural and more musical.
- 8. Arpeggiation, although not always inspiring, will never fail to sound correct when it is done in a rhythmically convincing manner.** Good jazz players, much of the time, simply express the chord melodically through arpeggiation. If you look at the improvised solos of Charlie Parker, for example, you'll find many phrases that are essentially arpeggiations of the basic chord. Chord arpeggiation is a good place to start.

9. **The tones of a chord are the most stable.** Most phrases that are improvised alongside each chord should begin and end with a note in the chord. Any note outside of a chord can be thought of and described as a *dissonance*. Once you move from a chord tone to a step above or below the chord tone, you are moving to a dissonance and you "displace" or cancel the chord tone. In a sense, you are left "hanging." The dissonance, moreover, must be resolved. The dissonance is resolved by either returning the same chord tone (by step) or moving to another chord tone (by step).

10. **A chord tone is a good place to begin and end each phrase.** The notes in each chord can be connected by step using the notes in between them. When this is done, the technique is referred to as a passing motion, and the notes in between are called *passing tones*.

11. **Chord tones are almost always connected or embellished by *step*; a step forms the basis of much melodic motion.** A step is either a half-step (for example, B to C, or F to Gb), or a whole step (for example, C to D, or E to F#). One and a half steps (even though they may exist in some scales and described as a step in some cases) do not form a step relation. Notes that connect one chord tone to the next by step are called *passing tones*.

12. **Another way to embellish each chord is through a *neighbor tone* embellishment.** This is when you play a chord tone, play a note related by step above or below the chord tone, and return back to the chord tone.

13. **Although you can skip from a chord tone, you do not want to skip from a dissonance!** (a note outside the chord) The dissonance *must* be resolved. You must play the phrase through so that it continues *by step* until it resolves to another stable tone, i.e., chord tone. If you play a note outside a chord and you skip from it, it will not sound idiomatic to the style, and in many cases, it will simply just sound bad.

14. **A chord is not an isolated entity with a matching scale.** Rather, the choice of notes that is most appropriate for a given chord will depend on the context, or setting that the chord is in. In other words, the key of the piece, the chord progression, the chords that precede and follow a given chord, and so forth, will determine what you hear. As a result, your ear will naturally be drawn to different note choices or scales for passing tone and neighbor tone embellishments.

15. **Listen.** Consider the aural element. Unlike traditional notated music that is based on a tradition of literature, jazz and improvised music is an aural art form. As a result, you need to develop your sense of the music by listening to recordings. It is only through listening that you can get a sense of rhythm and swing, melodic phrasing and expression, and the way different jazz artists approach improvisation.

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